Confederacy is the answer

Column by Matthew H. Hersch

When the Soviet empire collapsed like a little skyscraper two years ago, a lot of people realized that the end of free-speech restrictions and hard-line rule in Eastern Europe would bring about liberal reforms and an end to the Cold War. Yet, there has been no one forcing them to be a little less communist. Russians, Georgians, Lithuanians, Hungarians and others suddenly remembered that they hate each other. In the Soviet Union, provinces vie for autonomy; in former satellite states, ethnic minorities vie for independence.

In Yugoslavia, inter-ethnic tension is getting real, violent real fast, and unlike the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia hasn’t been moderately-elected national military to stop the infighting. These days, it seems that if you get a nationalist Bosnian, Croat, Hercegovinian, Kosovian, Macedonian, Serb, Slovenian and Vojvodinian in a room together, there’s bound to be trouble.

The Serbs are most represented in high national government and military positions, and want a strong central government which they can dominate. Croats, less influential in the present government, have no problem with national government, so long as they don’t have to listen to it. They’ve formed their own local army to spook the Serbs living in Croatia. Yugoslavians want independence, but not as badly as the Croats. Croats, as a result, accuse Bosnians of being goonish wonderers. Serbs, meanwhile, hold a long-standing enmity for the Croats because of Croatian collaboration with Nazi occupiers of Yugoslavia during World War II. Confused? The Bosnians and Macedonians are too.

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The two options immediately suggested to solve these troubles are the same ones that have been suggested since that Bosnia with a gun killed that dude and started that war a long time ago. A grand, unified Yugoslavia with a strong central government would prevent the needless duplication of military and social services that would plunge decentralization, independent Yugoslav states. Then again, many Slavic nationalism already oppose this scheme because they fear it will place important government powers in the hands of people who would like to see them dead. Many believe, meanwhile, that the existence of independent midget-states, while more acceptable to many ethnic minorities, would open up the region to military and by foreign powers.

If the conflict continues, it will be largely misapplied. Soldiers who hate each other, forced into a federal army, won’t fight well, anyway. Neither a central government nor a federal army holds the answer. What Yugoslavia, and a lot of other regions need, is a confederation.

Confederates have gotten a bad reputation in this country, not only because they are associated with the Civil War, but because US history texts arrive at the conclusion that the Articles of Confederation which existed between the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Constitution was inefficient and ineffective. They have slandered legitimate form of government.

Confederates are loose organizations of states with a limited central government. Under the Articles of Confederation, each state was essentially sovereign; it could enter into treaties with foreign powers, standardize measurements of money, and currency fell under federal jurisdiction. While a small central army existed, defense rested largely on state militias — the National Guard of today. The states had no power to tax effectively or establish centralized domestic policy objectives, but Yugoslavia doesn’t need to be like either. Yugoslavia, a state recovering from communism, autocratic domination, needs economic freedom and government non-intervention to transform itself.

The period under the Articles of Confederation, while imperfect, was still one of tremendous economic growth.

A Yugoslavian confederacy would not need what it has now — a large central government, filled with Croats enlisted men who hate their Serbian officers, stationed in Slovenia and financed with Serbian taxes. In many provinces, local militias already exist — if they were legalized and replaced the national army, most of the present ethnic disputes would disappear. A treaty between the states could provide for national defense by linking the militias in an alliance. Forcing Yugoslavians together will never work, and a loose confederation is better than no confederation at all.